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Memor. p. 372

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THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH.

*Not in Casey
" " Lande*

A SERMON

PREACHED IN QUEBEC CATHEDRAL,

ON SUNDAY, JUNE 21, 1863,

AT THE CONSECRATION OF THE

RIGHT REV. JAMES WILLIAM WILLIAMS, D.D.,

LORD BISHOP OF QUEBEC.

BY

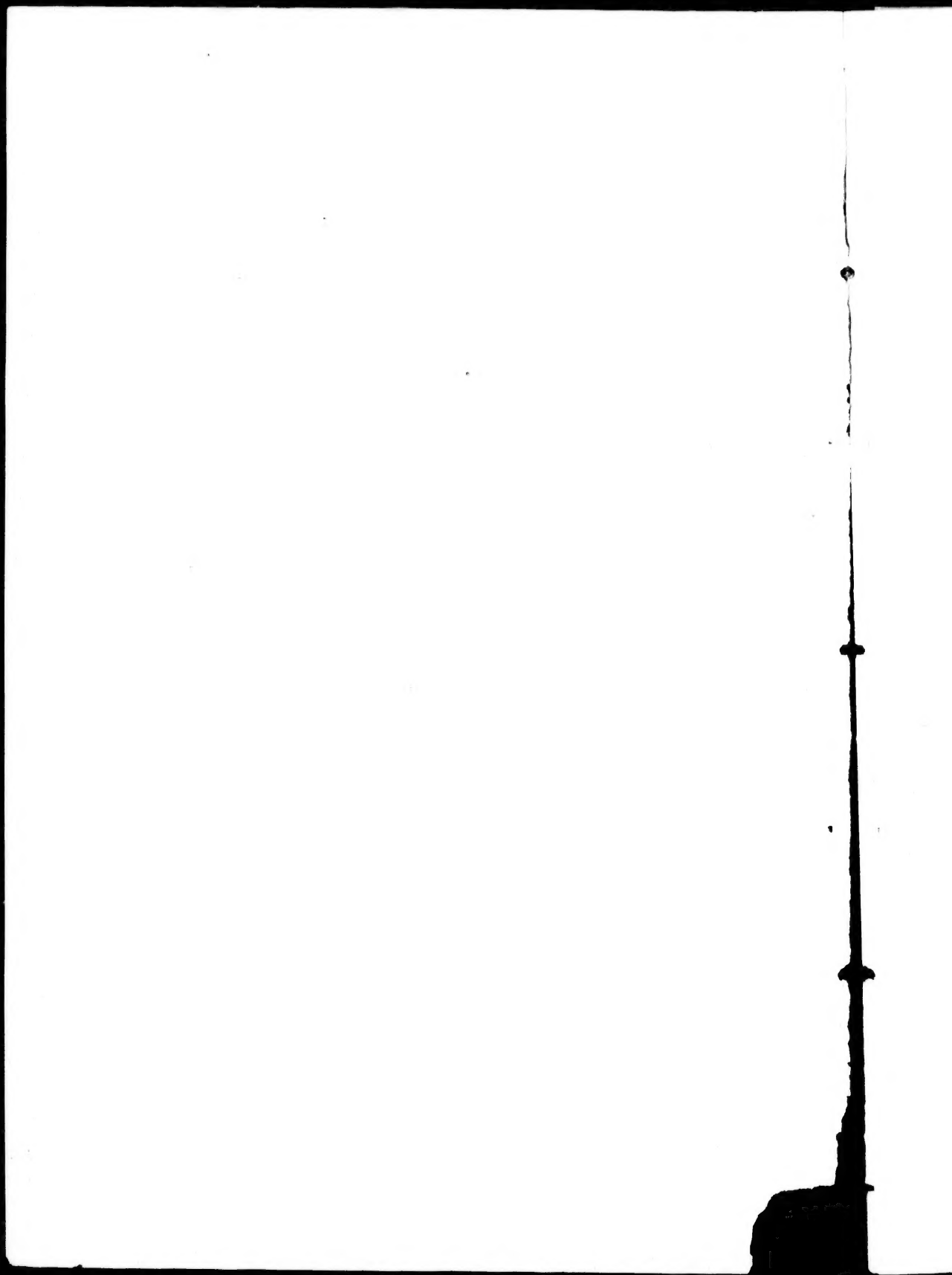
J. H. THOMPSON, M.A.,

CANON OF CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL, AND EXAMINING CHAPLAIN TO THE
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To the most Reverend
Francis Fulford, D.D.,
Lord Bishop of Montreal,

and

Metropolitan of Canada,

This Sermon,

Published at his request,

With his kind permission

Respectfully dedicated.

SERMON.

"The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks: The seven stars are the Angels of the seven churches, and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches." *Revelation i. 20.*

The occasion on which we are here assembled, my Christian brethren, from its unusual interest and importance must, in any case, have rendered the office of the preacher one of considerable difficulty and delicacy. But in the present instance when the preacher who has been selected belongs to the second order of the ministry only, he cannot fail to be possessed with an almost overwhelming sense of this difficulty and responsibility, and may well pause on the threshold of his subject to ask for an indulgent consideration. When a Presbyterian rises in the pulpit to deliver words of exhortation or advice to candidates for the Diaconate or the Priesthood, he may be supposed to draw from the depths of his experience; he addresses them at least from the level of that order to which they aspire; and the weight of knowledge, of age, and of position, is on his side. In those instances, moreover, the Church has pointed, by an express rubric, to the leading topics of the discourse: the duty and office of such as come to be admitted priests and deacons; how necessary these orders are in the church of Christ, and how the people ought to esteem them in their office. But in the consecration of a bishop, she has given the preacher an unlimited discretion; for doubtless she felt that it would be invidious and unseemly to call upon one who might be merely of Presbyteral rank to speak with authority on the duties of an office of which he

could have no experience, and that too in the presence of the fathers of the Church, men whose temples have grown grey in the active discharge of those very duties of which a mere ideal was being drawn.

But of the office itself, of the authority which it claims and of the advantages which that form of government confers upon the Church, there is no reason why we should not speak. It seems on the contrary to be our proper theme and subject at this time when a new member is about to be grafted into the Episcopate. We seem called upon to state the commission by which we act, and to remind all present of the light in which they are to regard him who is so soon to become their Father-in-God. Whatever temptation there may have been in times past to dwell on matters of Church polity from the pulpit, that subject is now but seldom handled. To bring it prominently forward, unless the occasion should so demand, is felt by many to be an assault on those who differ from us, or an undue magnifying of ourselves. Some value their own privileges so cheaply that they hardly care to dwell upon them; others are so strongly convinced of the primitive and scriptural character of their polity that they are disposed to think that the truth can take care of itself. But whatever may be the reason, there can be no doubt that many of our lay brethren have been hitherto but imperfectly awake to the strong, I might say the impregnable position of their Church, and have in consequence withheld from her much of that zeal and confidence and love which she so fully merits and demands. But now the line of our Canadian bishops is no longer to be continued from the other side of the Atlantic. The Church, complete in her organization and machinery, has taken root in our midst; she stands boldly forward to court observation, to challenge inspection, to demand scrutiny. And we cannot but hope that the great event of this day will not only tend to knit together more closely the bands of union between the several dioceses of Canada, but will create in

the minds of all who have taken part in this ceremonial an intelligent and reverent appreciation of the office and work of a bishop, which will make them better and more attached members of the Church all their life long.

We shall not, however, attempt in this discourse a view of the whole argument for Episcopacy. Such a review would of itself acquire no ordinary powers of compression, covering as it must needs do so great a space both within and without the books of the New Testament. The subject has moreover been so thoroughly handled in a discourse which must be fresh in your memory, that it would be presumptuous in me to attempt to follow in the same footsteps. Let it suffice us to select the latest period of the Inspired Record, and endeavour to ascertain how far the present form of our Church polity may be traced therein. If we shall find that something very like it in its essential features was there permanently established, and that it received indirectly at least the stamp of the Divine approval, then surely for all thoughtful and earnest minds the question will be solved. And even if the evidence be insufficient to carry absolute conviction to the mind, still, if it is of such a character as to render it probable in a high degree that Episcopacy has the sanction of Christ, the duty of adhering to it will be nearly as stringent as would arise from an entire certainty; for where there is a doubt, it is the part of faith and love to take that side which on the whole appears most in accordance with the will of our Blessed Redeemer.

The book of Revelation stands in marked contrast to the other books of the New Testament, and even to the other writings of the same inspired author. It is the link which connects the prophetic elements of the two covenants. Abandoning the simple practical style of the Gospels and Epistles, the Revelation introduces us into a region of visions and symbols, by which are shadowed forth the great mysteries of God's dealings with His Church. Nor are the Epistles

to the seven churches any exception. They are not to be viewed as a distinct and detached portion of the book. Simple as they appear, they are full of mysterious and symbolical meanings. The very number chosen out of so many Asiatic churches,—the small relative importance of some of them,—the solemn appeal so often renewed, “he that hath an ear let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches,”—all go to prove that these churches are selected as representatives of the Church Universal. In some way or other their distinguishing characteristics are more or less repeated in all the churches of Christendom. They are a summary, an epitome of church life and decay; and every diocese of Christ’s Holy Catholic Church may behold in one or other of this mystical seven its own features, with the appropriate warning or promise that belongs to it.

Another question now presents itself. The messages of Christ are not sent directly to the churches, but are addressed in every instance to the Angel of the church. In what signification are we to understand this term? Is a member of the heavenly hierarchy intended? or is it a mere periphrasis for the church itself? or can we hence deduce any conclusion as to the constitution of these churches which are thus set forth as types of the Church Universal?

It belongs to the mystical and prophetic character of this book that the ordinary and familiar names of things are not employed. There is no evidence, I believe, that the name “angel” was ever in use in the church for any grade of church officer, unless with conscious reference to this passage.*

* It was however well adapted to express the office and function of the ministry, as bearing God’s commission, and bound to labour in His service with zeal, constancy, patience and perseverance, like their heavenly prototypes. The very term had indeed been already used in the Greek version of Malachi (ii. 7), “The priests’ lips should keep knowledge, and the people should seek the law at his mouth, for he is the messenger (ἄγγελος, angel) of the Lord of Hosts.”

The word then is one which does not interpret itself, and we are left to fall back upon such internal and external evidence as may be available, if we would fix the nature of the angel to whom the message is sent.

Perhaps some one will maintain that "angels," properly so called, are here intended, the invisible ministers of the Almighty, and some names of weight may be quoted in defence of this view. But we may ask, why should St. John, a man upon earth, be commissioned to address angels whose place is in heaven before God's throne? Again, this invisible patron or president of the church must assuredly be one of the holy angels, one of that glorious company who are held up in the Lord's Prayer itself for our encouragement and imitation. But how can the praise and blame bestowed upon those officers suit the character of the *holy* angels? Here are promises of a crown of life, if faithful unto death, rebukes for suffering the unchecked growth of heresy; threats of total and absolute rejection. How could it be said to an angel of heaven "I have somewhat against thee because thou hast left thy first love?" We may therefore safely dismiss from our enquiry the idea that a guardian angel (so to speak) over the several churches is to be here understood.

But perhaps by the angels are meant the churches themselves. Thus it would not be the angel, some particular officer, that is addressed, but the church itself, viewed as God's angel or messenger to the world. But a distinction is drawn between the stars which are the angels, and the candlesticks or lamps which represent the churches. Besides if this were the meaning, the epistles would be throughout forced and unnatural. If the angel is a mere synonym for the church, how vague and indirect is the message! We lose our grasp of its meaning, and become enveloped in a haze of obscurity. We may then at once set aside this interpretation as the least likely of all that have been suggested.

Shall we then see, as some German commentators have

recently seen, in these angels the messengers, literally so called, who were deputed by the several churches to lay their state before the apostle, and to request his assistance as the channel of intercommunion between themselves and the enthroned Saviour? If these messengers were indeed responsible for the government of the churches,—if they were the chief men in each, on whose shoulders rested the keys of doctrine and discipline,—there might be something in this view. But there is no trace of such an embassy; it is a mere imagination, and the only supposition which could explain the style and tone of the replies vouchsafed would leave these angels in possession of that dignity and authority with which the ordinarily received explanation would invest them.

Since then we cannot discover in the angels either members of the celestial host, or messengers from the churches, or a circuitous mode of expression for the church itself, the conclusion is unavoidable that some kind of church officer is meant. Indeed the "stars" to which they are compared would of themselves lead us to this result. "As the lamps represent the churches," actual vessels containing light, so the stars which are "concentrated sparks of light" represent actual persons in or connected with the churches. "The star in scripture is the recognized symbol of authority whether ecclesiastical or civil. Thus the highest dominion of all was typified by the star which should come forth out of Jacob!.. Faithful teachers are stars which shall shine for ever; false teachers are wandering stars or stars that fall from heaven." (Trench.)

Shall we say then that each of these churches represented one congregation only, and that the pastor or minister or elder of this congregation is the "angel" of the apocalypse? But this view will hardly suit the case of Ephesus, where many years before there were several Presbyters, whom St. Paul summoned to Miletus, and to whom he addressed a parting charge. Again some years later we find that Timothy

has authority given him over a number of teachers of various ranks and orders. We have moreover the non-inspired testimony of St. Ignatius, who himself wrote Epistles to three of the seven churches not long afterwards, that there were in Ephesus, Smyrna, and Philadelphia many Priests and Deacons. So that the hypothesis that the "angel" is the pastor of a single congregation is inconsistent with the known facts of the case.

Perhaps it will be said that the star is put for the collective body of the clergy. No doubt it includes them. All who have directly or indirectly a share in building up the body of Christ are amenable to the censure or partakers in the praise. But it is as connected with the one head, as virtually contained in him. For it is a star that is spoken of, not a constellation. And though the star might stand for a series of men, continued by succession, it would not be a very apt figure for a body of individuals. Moreover the "angel" is addressed as solely and individually responsible for the state of the whole church, which would not hold of a body of pastors who could only be responsible each for his own share, and of whom a portion by their lukewarmness might thwart and neutralize the energies of the rest. Again, elsewhere in the Revelation the titles of "angel" and "star" are never figuratively applied to bodies of men, but always denote single persons. And lastly, if we suppose the ministry collectively to be meant, that would be to take for granted what it is impossible to prove, that those ministers were united in one body corporate or presbytery so that they could be contemplated as an organic whole.

There is now but one conclusion left, that which the church has always held, viz., that in every separate church or diocese there was one person vested with authority over both clergy and laity, to whom belonged the powers both of ordination and of jurisdiction, who is here figuratively termed an "angel," and who is now known to us by the name of "bishop."

If this reasoning be correct, and it is certainly no question of private interpretation, but the view adopted, as far as I can ascertain, by the great majority of the learned and thoughtful in all ages,—if, I say, this reasoning be correct, we have a sanction distinctly and directly divine for that form of church government which we term diocesan Episcopacy. And since the seven churches typify and set forth the churches of universal christendom, we may say that all churches are contemplated by the Divine Mind as existing in their perfect state at least through all ages and in all countries under this polity and constitution.

We conclude then that in the latest stage of church history of which inspiration has preserved to us the record, Episcopacy was the recognized and normal type of government, and that that type was intended to continue. We would now proceed a step further and reverently enquire into the reasons, if any such should be discernible, which may have led the Divine Wisdom to select this polity rather than another. God no doubt chooses what is best, and that which He chooses may be said to be the best, because He chooses it. Yet, we cannot but feel that there must be some strong and deep-lying reasons for the divine approval of one form rather than another. The ground of those reasons may for a time be obscure or imperceptible, but sooner or later, by the efflux of time or the course of events, they will be vindicated to man. Nor is it indeed as a mere arbitrary appointment that we venerate and uphold Episcopacy. We regard it as a continual token of Christ's presence with his church: the pledge of innumerable blessings; the guarantee for the unbroken preservation of a great system of faith and worship bequeathed to us by the earliest and purest ages of christianity. And therefore though we would not deny, God forbid, our brother's hope, nor pronounce dogmatically that Episcopacy was essential to the *being* of a church, yet we do maintain, and with the facts before us we cannot choose but to maintain that it is

necessary to the *well-being* of a church ; and that to those who reject or condemn it the evil effects of such disparagement will in due time, most assuredly, make themselves felt.

There are many results which might be obtained equally by any form of government, provided it be firmly established and vigorously administered. We are therefore to look for the distinctive excellencies of Episcopacy not in that which it has in common with all government, but rather in those distinguishing features which belong to it as a form in which one order is permanently elevated above the rest and entrusted with undivided responsibility and with the powers of government and ordination.

First in order in the advantages of an Episcopal form of government, I shall reckon that which the Epistles to the Seven Churches suggest—the concentration of responsibility. In all well-regulated governments, the onus of any particular duty is thrown upon one man. There are rules indeed, canons and statutes and laws to restrain and indicate his course, which he may not contravene. But still he is the guiding spirit. Whatever is to be done, he is directly or indirectly the doer of it. He may avail himself of all the help or counsel he can command, but he may not shrink from or evade the duty laid to his charge. The duty of the Bishop is in accordance with the rules of Scripture and the canons of the church to superintend, arrange, direct, appoint subordinates, command, rebuke, exhort, remove. In the discharge of this his appointed work, he must enjoy a certain freedom of action, crippled by no undue responsibility to others. If the work of the church drag languidly along, if indifference and worldliness consume her very life, if her rules and ordinances are trampled upon with impunity, and her faith and worship despised and rejected, the blame must rest somewhere ; and though each must bear his own burden, we are taught in these Epistles that the spread and continuance of such disorders are due to the culpable remissness and luke-

warmness of the prelate, to whom belongs the power of enforcing the discipline of the church, and who is the main-spring of the whole ecclesiastical machinery.

Next in the catalogue of the advantages of episcopacy, we would place the fact that it affords a proper and legitimate standpoint for the extended influence of the best and wisest and holiest men that can be chosen. It was doubtless the intention of the Great Head of the church—it has been the rule for the most part, that those who sit on episcopal thrones, should be in piety and ability eminently able to influence and sway others. In that position of pre-eminence their talents and their zeal become mighty engines for good. There is little danger of jealousy, and rivalry and personal ambition. Their position is secured and unassailable. Their only object is to attract men to Him whose commission they bear. They illustrate the church with their virtues; and while they promote and deepen personal religion, at the same time they strengthen the bands of attachment to the church, of whose faith and practice they set so fair an example.

But were all ministers of the same order, possessed of equal powers and privileges, then commanding talents and force of character must often prove a source of mischief and danger to the Church. There is no one who by his position has the right to check and control any new or erratic practice or doctrine, and the interference of equals in rank but inferiors in personal endowments is apt to be resented. There is no position of dignity and influence in which such powers may find their proper exercise, and develop themselves under suitable safeguards for the edifying of the church. Deprived of a legitimate outlet, they will make a channel for themselves; adherents will be gathered, a party founded, and perhaps at last a new schism will be set up.

Hence we may perceive a third great good of episcopacy in checking jealousies and divisions, and securing unity. According even to Presbyterian writers, it was found needful

at a very early date to change their supposed system of ministerial parity into that which for so many centuries prevailed universally in the church. The danger of universal equality is soon found out. There is no sufficient principle of cohesion, no centre of unity, and therefore no sense of the sin of division and no scruple in rending the body of Christ. The history of all the Protestant non-episcopal bodies will prove the truth of these assertions. They have all been divided and sub-divided, while on the other hand, no schism worthy the name has ever taken place from the church of England or its daughter churches since the reformation. The short-lived schism of the non-jurors is the exception which proves the rule. And this unbroken unity is the more remarkable, because it is well known that two strongly marked schools of opinion have existed for centuries within our pale. The adherents of each have been no doubt sincerely and conscientiously attached to their principles, but they nevertheless have felt that unity was above all to be prized, and that the worst way of preserving the precious treasures within was to break the casket in which they were contained. Here we have an answer ready to all those who would reproach us with the permitted varieties of opinion on points of grave importance—that at all events they were not so held as to lead to a breach of charity, and that subjects which elsewhere had rent great communions asunder, had not been permitted to disturb the unity of the episcopal church.

The advantages of our polity in preserving unity can be seen not only from that instinct which it fosters, but from the difficulties which it throws in the way of schism. A breach in the church cannot be effected merely by the withdrawal of one or two congregations, but involves the falling away of an entire diocese. And even if that took place, still the division would not be perpetuated, unless sufficient Bishops could be found to consecrate a successor—no easy task in face of certain disapproval and non-acknowledgment by the

rest of the church. So that episcopacy, though it does not make division impossible, renders it difficult in the greatest conceivable degree.

Nor is the reverent estimation in which the Bishop's office is or ought to be held altogether a matter to be despised. In the overgrown dioceses of England, this influence has scarcely a healthy course. The Bishop is often too much of a great state functionary. But in a simpler state of things, where the Bishop can visit every parish at no remote interval, and become personally known to every church family, the salutary effects of his office can hardly be over estimated. It leads an additional weight to the position and teaching of the resident parish-priest. It corroborates what is right, it rectifies or supplements what is incorrect or insufficient. The respect shewn to the chief pastor tends to strengthen the respect shewn to the local pastor, to call forth increased love to the church, to animate to new and increased exertions. The periodic visitation and the anxious preparation for that event may serve to recall His coming, of whom the Bishop is the chief earthly minister. and keep fresh in the memories and hearts of all the presence of Him who walketh up and down in the midst of the Lamps of Fire.

Again, the fixed, irremovable position of the Bishop is a great element of good. In this continent especially, everything is in motion. There is a great up-heaving of men's minds—institutions are being tested to the full—new forms start into life—the popular will is all in all. Amidst this scene of confusion, the church stands forth as ever the bulwark of peace and order, combining fixity of doctrine and discipline in fundamentals with the flexibility in minor matters demanded by the times. Where shall we look for the secret of her stability? where indeed but in the divine presence with that episcopate, which does not owe its authority to the popular will nor is amenable to its control, but which traces its commission in unbroken spiritual descent from the apostolic

eleven upon whom Christ breathed after His resurrection and whom He sent forth from the Mount of the Ascension ?

Again, we would specify as an additional benefit of this form of government, the powerful incentive to active piety afforded by a long evergrowing line of spiritual ancestry, and by the conviction that all that is done for good or evil will, in its turn, bear fruit in the generations yet to come ? There is a verse of a living poet, quoted only too often in the popular literature of the day, to this effect :

“ Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And departing leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.”

Now as commonly understood and applied, this passage teaches a hideous fallacy. It is not in the power of every one to make his life sublime, in the manner here indicated. To tell him so is to make him unhappy, and discontented with himself, with his position, and even with his God. The only sublimity which most men can reach is the sublimity of doing their duty, however humble and unprepossessing, with all their might. If they are to rise in the world, this is their path of progress. Indeed Solomon tells us, “ Seest thou a man diligent in his business ? he shall stand before kings, he shall not stand before mean men.” But it is otherwise with him who is entrusted with government and control over his fellows, who is as a star in the right hand of his Lord. The memory of the good men who have preceded,—the hope of leaving a name of which the church may be justly proud,—the consciousness that his public acts are matters of history ;—these are motives than which stronger can scarcely be found to rouse and animate the heart of man. The portraits of his predecessors which hang around the walls of the Bishop’s dwelling,—the institutions they have founded or cherished in the diocese,—the monuments which tell of the account which they have gone to render,—must daily and hourly remind him, whose head

now wears the mitre of the work he has to do, of the mighty results that depend upon it, and of the undying praise or blame with which his memory will be associated.

But it may be said, these are mere secondary motives, of the earth, earthy, insufficient to reach and stir the depths of the heart. Then we would place as the last and strongest of all that solemn sense of nearness of Christ and of direct responsibility to Him which must arise from any adequate view of the episcopal office. The Bishop is the lineal inheritor of the promise made to the Apostles, "Lo! I am with you always even to the end of the world." He is the chief representative and ambassador of Christ. He is the recipient of special grace and blessing to qualify him for his work, of which St. Paul speaks, writing to Timothy: "Neglect not the grace that is in thee by the imposition of my hands." What glorious privileges are here set forth! what storehouses of wisdom and strength are here opened! what a mighty call and summons to be faithful is here sounded! The Saviour's presence is pledged to His ministers. He is no distant unapproachable being, whose very reality seems to fade away in the dimness of history, but an ever present Helper, who walketh up and down in the midst of His church or body mystical, and thence dispenses the rich gifts of His Spirit to all His servants, according to their several offices and degrees, and especially to him who is the symbol of His presence and the star in His right hand.

Nor is it without His presence and sanction, let us be fully assured, that we are here met together in His name to add another link to the chain which binds the church of this generation to the primitive church of Judea. Although we do not possess any direct mark of His approval, although no lot disposed by heaven has indicated the successor to the vacant see yet Christ, we know, has not resigned the government of His church, and that which He effects by His secret influence

upon the minds of men is as truly His appointment as if He had spoken audibly from heaven.

This is but the second time that a bishop has been consecrated in Canada. The former consecration was that of the first bishop of a new diocese and was therefore free from those sad remembrances which throw a shadow over the present occasion. Amidst our hopes and anticipations and prayers for the future, we cannot but recall that tall commanding form, that loving earnest voice, that pure disinterested kindness, that fervent charity and active benevolence which we have so long known and esteemed and revered in the good bishop who has so lately entered into his rest. No one who knew him could be insensible to the charm of his conversation and character, or unconscious of the pure and lofty principles by which his conduct was always regulated. He is gone, the father of the Canadian Episcopate, the last bishop of the undivided province. He is gone, but his work remains; and the church that can count names like his in her line of prelates need not fear that her candlestick will be speedily removed.

"In sacred sleep the pious bishop lies;
Say not in death; a good man never dies."

We may not linger on this theme. Our thoughts must now be turned to him who is about to be consecrated your bishop. We have seen the high sanction which that office claims, as well as the heavy responsibilities which it entails. Give then to him, whom God has set over you, your full loving confidence, your hearty co-operation, your entire respect. Strengthen his hands by your willing service, by your devotion to the work of Christ, by your continual and earnest supplications before the throne of grace. O for a church in which such godly union and concord could be fully realized, in which bishop and priests and people were all linked together in one holy brotherhood of faith and prayer and mutual affection and good works and considerate allowances and fervent

zeal ! Such was the church of Ephesus in the days of her first love ; such is the perfect ideal of a christian church, as “ a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work.”

And to you, the bishop-elect, hitherto our brother in the ministry, soon to be revered as a father in Israel, we would say but a few words ere we close. You have by the faithful discharge of laborious and important duties purchased for yourself (unwittingly indeed, and unwillingly so far as the honour was concerned,) “ a good degree and great boldness in the faith of Christ.” May you continue to display in this new and wider sphere the same qualities of discretion and faithfulness and energy which have hitherto distinguished your course. And O ! may he into whose nearer service you are now about to be raised pour out upon you in rich abundance the treasures of His blessing. May he give you a constant sense of His presence, a holy care to please and obey Him in all things, and a courageous heart to contend manfully for the faith against whatever adversaries may arise. May He enlighten your mind to discern what is just and right amidst the haze of doubt and difficulty, and to follow it unflinchingly without partiality or the fear of man. May He give you the word of wisdom to speak that which is needful in due season. May He comfort and protect you in your long and lonely journeyings by land and sea. As life rolls on, may He vouchsafe you ever more and more the seals of His approval to your ministry. And finally, when your work and labor of love is ended, may He, the chief shepherd, “ bestow upon you a crown of glory that fadeth not away !”